

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION AND BICYCLE COMMITTEE

Fiscal Year 2004

The Public Transportation and Bicycle Committee's primary purposes are to review proposals involving public transportation policy, to advise and report to the Select Board and Town Meeting on transportation-related articles, and to conduct specific transportation studies. In recent years, the Committee has concerned itself with a wide range of transportation topics, including transit planning, bicycle and pedestrian travel and facilities, and sustainable land use and transportation policies. The Committee is dedicated to encouraging and supporting transportation alternatives to the automobile, and to promoting these options among Town residents and Town officials.

The Public Transportation and Bicycle Committee held monthly meetings throughout fiscal year 2004 and Committee members spent their time and energies on a large variety of projects and topics. During the year, the Committee had an active Bicycle Subcommittee, and a representative on the Disability Access Advisory Committee. In addition, Public Transportation and Bicycle Committee members attended a number of Select Board meetings and a variety of meetings of other Town committees when issues important to the Public Transportation and Bicycle Committee were being discussed. These committees included the Public Works Committee, the Town Commercial Relations Committee, and the Comprehensive Planning Committee.

Bus Services

As in years past, discussions of bus service in Amherst and potential service cuts were a major focus for the Public Transportation and Bicycle Committee in FY 04. For another year, the Massachusetts legislature continued to underfund the Regional Transit Authorities within the Commonwealth, creating major financial difficulties for the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority (PVRTA) and other regional transit agencies. For FY 04, the state again funded PVRTA and other transit agencies in the state at the FY 01 funding level. Since costs increased significantly from 2001 to 2004, this funding shortfall has led the PVRTA both to cut services and raise fares.

Bus service cuts

In the Amherst area, the main routes slated for service cuts in FY 05 were three of Amherst's four Town-sponsored routes, which cover the Gatehouse Road, the West Street/Bay Road, and the Pine Street areas (the fourth Amherst-sponsored route, the Amity Shuttle, faced no service cuts). Due to its continuing funding difficulties, the PVRTA decided to discontinue its financial support for these routes completely, beginning in FY 05. Because of budget constraints, the PVRTA has been forced to cut service for a number of its routes, including those in the Springfield and Holyoke areas which have very high levels of ridership, and the PVRTA determined it could no longer justify contributing to Amherst Town routes which had modest numbers of riders and, in some cases, showed declining ridership patterns.

In FY 04, as in previous years, the Town of Amherst was responsible for paying approximately 30 percent of the cost of running the Town routes. Because of the PVRTA's decision to drop its funding for the Gatehouse Road, West Street/Bay Road, and Pine Street routes, the Town of Amherst will have to pay 100 percent of continued outreach route costs in FY 05 and beyond. The Town of Amherst is committed to supporting public transit services; the Finance Director and Town Manager worked with UMass Transit and the Public Transportation and Bicycle Committee to continue service to these areas, to meet the needs of residents who rely on public

transportation. A "pretzel route," an economical combining of the three former outreach loops but leaving out the Bay Road extension, with four runs each day, was devised by UMass Transit and approved by the Select Board for FY 05.

Another route slated for cuts in FY 05 was the M40 bus, known as the Minuteman Express, which runs between Haigis Mall on the UMass campus and Smith College. The Minuteman Express was originally established to assist commuters during the Coolidge Bridge construction; with the Coolidge Bridge project now completed, funding was cut. Five College Inc. worked with UMass Transit and the PVTa to help save this service, and agreed to increase its contribution for the service substantially. As a result, the Minuteman Express bus was saved for FY 05. However, the number of runs was cut to eight per weekday, with a focus on providing morning and late-afternoon/early evening commuter service. There is no longer midday or evening runs of this bus. Also, funding has not yet been secured for the Minuteman Express route beyond FY 05.

Paratransit and van service

Amherst continued to have paratransit and van service for disabled Amherst residents and the elderly, and the service continued to be very popular. Ridership figures for the service were just slightly lower than the year before. The paratransit and van service is provided by Hulmes Transportation for the PVTa. This year, the Amherst Senior Center also obtained its own van, which can be used for scheduled shopping trips and other Senior Center outings.

Fare system

Beginning in FY 04, a fare system was introduced for bus and van transit in Amherst. The fares on the fixed-route buses apply to all riders who are not students or employees of the University of Massachusetts or the other area colleges (Hampshire College, Amherst College, Smith College, and Mount Holyoke College). The bus fare is 90 cents per ride, with discounted daily, weekly, and monthly passes also available. Children under age 6 ride the bus for free, and seniors and disabled riders are entitled to a 50 percent discount. The fare is on an honor system; there is no fare box on UMass Transit buses. Riders subject to the fare are expected to purchase bus tickets in advance of riding the bus. Tickets can be bought at Amherst Town Hall and the UMass Transit offices.

It is not clear how much of an impact the new fare system has had on ridership, but there remains some confusion about the new system. Since the new fare does not involve fare box collection when riders get on the bus, many riders appear still not to be aware that the new system is in place. More publicity needs to be done about the fare policy. In addition, Town officials have been discussing the possibility of having annual passes or family passes for the bus system that the Town could subsidize. The details, including the cost of such passes, have not yet been worked out.

Funding.

Funding for bus and van services continues to be an issue, and it is clear that a dedicated state source of funding for transit is needed. A positive development in the state's funding and support for transit services is that the Regional Transit Authorities (RTAs), including the PVTa, are expected to be switched over to a forward-funding mechanism in the near future. This will help the transit authorities plan for services more effectively, and will eliminate the interest charges that accrue under the current back-funding system.

Another possible option to improve funding for transit services in Massachusetts is to dedicate a portion of the state sales tax to the Regional Transit Authorities (the regional transit providers, except for the MBTA, which has a unique status). Currently, the MBTA is funded largely through the state sales tax. The state sales tax rate is currently 5 percent; and one-fifth of the sales tax (1 cent of each \$1 taxed) is dedicated to supporting the MBTA. The PVTA's Administrator, Gary Shepard, and area legislators have lobbied for the regional transit authorities, including the PVTA, to receive this portion of the sales tax for their own services. Otherwise, the sales tax paid by Western Massachusetts residents is helping the MBTA, but not the transit services in our own region. Predictably, the MBTA strongly opposes the efforts of the PVTA to gain this portion of the sales tax; and it is not clear if these efforts will be successful.

Links to other bus systems.

The Franklin Regional Transit Authority (FRTA) runs a route between Greenfield and Northampton and has extended two southbound and two northbound runs each weekday into Sunderland, where riders can connect to UMass Transit buses to Amherst and other locations. There have also been limited discussions about improving connections between FRTA and UMass Transit routes in Deerfield, in southern Franklin County. One option could be to adjust the times of the routes to facilitate better transfers between the two systems. These discussions are likely to continue in the coming year.

Alternatives for serving Amherst outreach areas.

With the current low level of transit service to the Amherst outreach areas (Gatehouse Road, Pine Street, West Street), it is likely that ridership levels in those areas could continue to fall. The Public Transportation and Bicycle Committee is interested in exploring alternative options for providing transit access to residents in these areas. Options could include some type of flexible, demand-response service, or a fixed-flexible combination service with a core fixed route, but with deviation to additional locations upon demand. Flexible transit routes have been implemented in Easthampton and in the Athol-Orange area.

Extending bus service on Route 9.

With all the new commercial development along Route 9 in Hadley, there has been considerable interest in expanding bus service to better serve existing and new stores in the Mountain Farms shopping plaza west of Walmart, and the planned Home Depot and Lowes shopping areas. Committee members support expanding transit in these areas and will be participating in discussions involving potential new bus stops in these locations as appropriate.

Bike racks on buses.

In FY 04, as in previous years, the bike racks were removed from UMass Transit buses during the winter. The bike racks provide an important option for bus riders who don't live near a bus stop, or who seek to combine bus and bike transportation for certain trips, such as shopping, or when the weather is difficult to bike in. The Public Transportation and Bicycle Committee will be working with UMass Transit again on this issue this year; it has been suggested that UMass Transit could be open to the idea of keeping bike racks on the buses year-round.

Bicycle Facilities and Planning

The Bicycle Subcommittee met during the year with the Superintendent of Public Works, Guilford Mooring and other Town staff, to discuss intersection reconstruction and new bicycle facilities, to reiterate past concerns about bicycle accommodations, and to prioritize future projects.

Bicycle lanes

A key focus of the Bicycle Subcommittee was the creation and marking of bicycle lanes in appropriate locations. Sometimes bicycle lane painting or repainting has been delayed because of planned or ongoing reconstruction or repaving projects. Since these types of projects are virtually continual, the Public Transportation Committee feels it is important that the bicycle lane markings and re-markings not be delayed because of other construction, and be given a higher priority.

The Bicycle Subcommittee worked with Mr. Mooring to develop guidelines for bicycle lane markings in areas with and without on-street parking. One concern was that in areas with on-street parking, it is essential that the bicycle lanes be wide enough to accommodate a door zone to protect cyclists from car doors that could open as they are riding by. Bicycle lane guidelines were approved by the Select Board during the summer of 2003, and bicycle lanes were marked during the following spring. On North Pleasant Street, extra width was left to help protect cyclists from car doors. The guidelines approved by the Select Board call for 11-foot car travel lanes, at least 3-4 foot bike travel lanes when there is no on-street parking, and at least 5-6 foot wide bike travel lanes when there is. In addition, when there is on-street parking, there should be a 1-2 foot door zone whenever possible.

Currently, the only marked bike lanes are in the center of town. Given the timeline worked out by the Department of Public Works and the Public Transportation Committee at meetings over the past few years, several other roads should have marked bikes lanes by now. These roads include East Hadley Road, East Pleasant Street, North Pleasant Street north of Eastman Lane, Main Street east of the railroad tracks, Amity Street below Lincoln Avenue, and perhaps North East Street.

Some specific bike lane and repaving issues of concern to the Public Transportation Committee and Bicycle Subcommittee include the following:

- reducing speed limits to 35MPH on North East Street and East Pleasant Street so that bicycle lanes can be fully marked with logos and arrows. The Select Board and the state would need to give approval for this
- repaving projects on North Pleasant Street and East Pleasant Street should include bicycle lanes
- problems with bicycle accommodations at the Amity Street and Main Street intersection; the center lines and detectors need to be moved to allow room for bicycle lanes
- readjusting the bicycle lanes at the Route 9-Route 116 intersection in the center of town to make them safer. Also, the bicycle lane traveling south past the Peter Pan Bus office should not go to the curb side as it approaches Route 9
- re-marking the bicycle lane in front of Bertucci's Restaurant. Currently the bike lane leads straight into the grass and a curb
- the recent East Pleasant Street repaving provided more width, but the white line was painted much too close to the road edge (the travel lane measured 13.5 feet in some spots with little room for the bicycle lane). The contractor has painted these white lines black; but new lines still haven't been added

- the North Pleasant Street repaving left several pinch points in the bicycle lane and new curbing which create dangerous situations for bicycles.

Bicycle route signage

During the year, the Committee continued its work to improve bicycle facility signage in Amherst. The Committee asked again for the removal of the outdated “Bike Route” signs along the South Pleasant Street and West Street sidewalks; the Committee has recommended their removal for at least the past three years. The Committee also encouraged the Town to remove the confusing new “Bikes stop on line for red” signs at some of the newly constructed intersections downtown. The Committee also advocated for the installation of “Share the Road” signs on the major roadway corridors into Amherst, if signs are still available from the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission.

Roadside maintenance and sand removal

Van Kaynor, a member of the Bicycle Subcommittee, prepared a letter for residents discussing the dangers of sweeping sand onto the road shoulder at the end of winter. This letter was then distributed to homes where sand was swept into the roadway to alert homeowners to the dangers of this practice, and to ask for their assistance in keeping the streets safe for cyclists.

Outreach

A breakfast for bicycle commuters was held on the Amherst Common during the annual Pioneer Valley Bike Commute Week (May 16-21). The breakfast was attended by a number of Committee members, Town staff, and a member of Select Board. Prior to Bike Commute Week, the Select Board passed a resolution supporting it and Amherst Bicycle Commute Day.

Pedestrian Facilities and Planning

Key activities undertaken during the year to support walking and the upgrading of the Town’s pedestrian facilities included the following:

Town pedestrian infrastructure map

A milestone event was the creation, by the Town Engineer at Committee request, of a first version of a Town Pedestrian Infrastructure Map. This infrastructure map is intended to present off-road facilities that are available for pedestrian use (hiking trails and bicycle paths) as well as the sidewalks that run alongside roads. Initial contacts have been made with the Conservation Department, with the idea that decisions about where to locate future trails could take into consideration what contribution they might make to the total Town pedestrian facilities network. Improving the Pedestrian Infrastructure Map and further developing relationships with the Conservation Department, which will shortly have new leadership, will be important tasks for the coming year.

Sidewalk snow plowing

This year the Department of Public Works (DPW) revisited its policy on plowing sidewalks in town, and consulted the Public Transportation Committee in doing so. In accordance with the Select Board policy, the DPW is only required to plow the sidewalks in front of Town-owned properties. However, the DPW has typically also plowed some additional sidewalks downtown and in the neighborhoods as time and budget allowed. Superintendent of Public Works Mooring recommended changing the DPW’s sidewalk plowing policy. The three primary options under consideration were (1) to plow only the sidewalks adjacent to Town-owned properties; (2) to

plow all the sidewalks in town; or (3) to continue, with some variation, the previous intermediate approach of plowing the sidewalks for Town-owned properties and an additional limited set of sidewalks, focusing on sidewalks in and near the downtown, and along primary pedestrian corridors. The Select Board adopted the third approach. However, controversy developed over this new policy, as some sidewalks that had been previously plowed by the DPW no longer were, and some residents complained, as they did not feel it was fair that some formerly-plowed sidewalks in front of private properties would continue to be plowed but not others. There was also concern about the difficulties disabled and elderly residents could have keeping their sidewalks clear. The Select Board is expected to review the sidewalk plowing policy, and consider further revisions during the coming fiscal year.

Pavement Management System

The Public Transportation Committee began to learn about the Pavement Management System that the Department of Public Works has been developing. Pavement Management System refers both to a strategy of engineering good practice for maintaining pavement (including sidewalks) in good condition, and to the software through which the strategy is implemented - keeping track of the condition of segments of pavement, taking account of maintenance history and usage data, and presenting a plan for maintenance over coming years. Data for the Pavement Management System is currently being collected; and the Public Works Department hopes to make the System fully operational within the next few years.

Subdivision sidewalk regulations

During a developer presentation to the Committee of a proposal to provide access to the Norwottuck Rail Trail from a new subdivision, the developer offered a suggestion that, in situations where the Planning Board might otherwise grant a waiver of the obligation to build subdivision sidewalks, a fee in lieu of sidewalk construction might be assessed instead, with proceeds made available for sidewalk construction elsewhere. The Planning Board, which has the power to amend the Town's Subdivision Regulations, has been approached about this matter, both directly and through the Planning Department. Planning Board action is anticipated.

Other activities

As in other years, the Public Transportation Committee from time to time met with Town staff and reviewed plans for construction projects that included sidewalks or crosswalks. Additionally, the Committee reviewed, and often took positions on, Town Meeting warrant articles that had pedestrian elements.

Developing a transportation or comprehensive plan

There have been discussions about the idea of having the Town of Amherst establish a Town transportation plan, or a comprehensive plan with a transportation component. Either type of plan would include an inventory and assessment of the current transportation infrastructure, and recommendations for future transportation facilities and improvements. Either type of plan would consider facilities for pedestrians, bicycles, bus and van service, and private motorized vehicles, and the ways in which the disparate pieces of the current transportation system could better link together. The Public Transportation Committee feels that a multi-modal, sustainable approach to transportation planning and investment is essential, and welcomes the opportunity to work with Town staff on better preparing for Amherst's future transportation needs.

Committee Membership

Members:

Tracy Zafian, Chair (April-June 2004)

Karen Jones, Chair (July 2003-April 2004, resigned from the committee)

Richard Alcorn, Molly Falsetti-Yu, Van Kaynor, Frank Wells, Ted White, Walter Wolnik

Eli Cooper (on leave for FY 04)

Alex von Braun (resigned)

Staff Liaisons

John Clobridge (resigned April 2004)

Select Board Liaisons

Anne Awad, Robie Hubley

Associate Members and Staff Participants

Margie Springer-Young, resident and former committee member

Al Byam, UMass Transit; Glenn Barrington, UMass Transit; Lorna Peterson, Five College Inc.;

Guilford Mooring, Amherst Public Works Department; Jonathan Tucker, Amherst Planning

Department; Niels la Cour, Amherst Planning Department